

FILLMORE COUNTY – TRAUMATIC TIMES

“Before Bob’s accident, I never took a day for granted. For some reason I must have known we were going to lose it all ...” - Sharon Auld

Dealing with traumatic brain injury wasn’t on Sharon Auld’s list of possibilities when she walked down the aisle 35 years ago.

But when her husband fell eight feet off a catwalk suspended over a white rock pit -- breaking the fall with his head -- that list grew into a world of difficulties she could have never imagined.

Bob and Sharon Auld had been sweethearts since junior high, growing up in the Gothenburg community they had grown to love as well. They were prospering farmers, farming over 1,000 acres of ground -- an impressive number in the early 80s. She was busy raising four children and later opened a coffee shop in Gothenburg while they continued to acquire more farm land. The sky was the only limit to their dreams.

“My husband was an excellent farmer,” Sharon says. “He was on the school board, deacon in the church, very outspoken and involved in the community.”

Bob was the also backbone of the family when their five-year-old daughter was diagnosed in June of 1983 with leukemia. The diagnosis began a three-year journey of a complete blood transfusion, bone marrow scrape, chemo and such traumatic treatments that at times these parents had to fight for altered procedures to save their daughter’s life: “(Our daughter) had whole brain radiation every day for two weeks, followed by a chemical treatment for another two weeks where she curled up like a ball and they put a chemical in her spine that went into her brain.”

The Aulds were just catching their breath and still in the midst of transporting their daughter to treatment centers when, four years after the initial leukemia diagnosis, Bob’s day at work would change their family’s lives to an even greater extent.

In between farming seasons, Bob was driving a grain truck for Nebraska Salt and Grain. On a cold December morning, workers had moved the catwalk for an extra wide railroad car. When they moved it back, workers didn’t bolt it down on the end.

Bob walked out on the suspended catwalk with his hands in his pocket, leaned against the rail and it flipped him into the bottom of the white rock pit below, falling on the top of his head.

Sharon had just returned home from her coffee shop business in Gothenburg and was enjoying a long phone conversation with her sister. Because the line was busy, no one could reach her until Sharon’s mother pulled into their driveway. When Sharon was told Bob had fallen, she envisioned cuts and stitches in the emergency room and back home by supper time. Little did she know that the strong faith this couple shared would be called upon more than ever.

“When I got to the hospital in Gothenburg he was talking out of his head, blood was coming out of his ears and they had an ambulance ready and a car waiting for me to follow to Kearney. They didn’t even have time to wait for the flight for life.”

After arriving at Good Samaritan in Kearney with Bob’s brother, Bill, and boss, Norm, sitting beside Sharon in the emergency room waiting area, she noticed an elderly couple being admitted into the emergency room and overheard their names. “I was chit-chatting with Norm and Bill about what I observed across the room watching the old couple as they were admitted with their daughter, Emily, assisting them. Norm and Bill saw them as only people ... I saw much more as

God revealed to me through the couple across the room my future with Bob as we grow old together. Norm and Bill only could listen to me chatter away until suddenly there was the surgeon in front of me and I was already prepared to answer his question. 'Do you want to go ahead with the surgery to save his life or shall we let him go'?

"No more had I got that vision from God when there was this surgeon looking up at me saying, 'I have 15 minutes to save your husband's life and here's what I have to do: remove the skull cap to get to the massive brain injury; remove two blood clots, remove a portion of the brain to release the pressure that is quickly building up which is the speech area and I must hurry. Now, that's what I have to do so save his life but I can't guarantee the quality of life he will have after that. Do you want to go ahead with the surgery or shall we just let him go?'"

Only with God's vision fresh in Sharon's mind -- growing old with Bob -- was she able to reply, "You must do the surgery. Go quickly and save his life because we're going to grow old together ... God assured me of that!"

Bob's brother and boss were mystified at Sharon's controlled response, but "that's how God ministers to you," she explains. "No holding my hand from my brother-in-law or his boss could have given me that comfort."

TO THE AMAZEMENT of the medical staff, Bob was moved out of the intensive care unit in two weeks and a month later transferred to rehab. When they arrived, the couple was told the staff would start doing an assessment of his condition and to expect a stay of around nine months.

Bob was there only two months.

"Nurses would tell us there are nine stages he will go through. Bob went from stage one to nine and skipped everything in between. In fact, he went through a laughing stage. The nurses just said he must be going to go through the other stages later," Sharon says in humor.

Even with the quick recovery in rehab Bob had no spoken language for three years, and then was plagued with grand mal seizures for the next ten years. A typical grand mal seizure is characterized -- among other reactions -- with loss of consciousness, falling down and rhythmic convulsions.

"The first five years Bob would have nine (seizures) a month and the rescue unit would come out every time along with twenty or so fire members each in their own pick-up. It was overwhelming for our children to go through. He was having a seizure in the bathroom once and the door was shut, so my son and I had to break down the door to get to him.

"My son was joined at the hip with his dad. Then his dad was gone. He didn't look the same, he didn't talk the same, and yet, he sat at the table and if the phone would ring, Bob would get agitated because he had no filtering system in his brain. If I was a kid I wouldn't have wanted to be in our house because it was scary, it was unnatural."

In the midst of the physical difficulties, the loss of income was also taking its toll. "Bob was back on the tractor -- he couldn't talk to us or say our children's names if they weren't in front of him -- but he was driving the tractor," Sharon says of her husband's strong work ethics.

Sharon had to pick up the burden. "I had to work and work, and work some more." She knew making five dollars an hour to support four children wasn't going to make ends meet so Sharon applied for Social Security disability, but it took three years before they saw anything come in.

"Getting disability is very difficult, even when you've had a massive brain injury and a thick file of medical reports because we were land owners and self-employed. But I could look in his eyes and know he was close to death. The spark in his eyes was gone, there was no life there. All he had was enough energy to get through the day, and there was no communication with his wife or interaction with his children."

"We lost everything," Sharon says on a somber note.

The dreams of farming, of passing the land onto his sons, the lifestyle they so loved were no more.

"Before Bob's accident, I never took a day for granted," Sharon says with a familiar faith. "For some reason I must have known we were going to lose it all because every day I'd go out and say, 'Thank you Father for the green grass, for my clothesline, for the clothespins. I'd just thank him for everything because then ... it was all gone.'"

SHARON ALSO HAD to be the main parent. And as the children grew older, her role grew increasingly challenged.

"Our children were traumatized. I can't tell you what it took to get those children raised. I've seen them through every horrible phase. Teenage years are tough but then it was exaggerated with everything else."

Bob and Sharon's children were only ten, nine, six and three that December of Bob's accident. Their father -- their rock and protector -- was gone and now the stranger that lived in their home had seizures and no speech they could understand. As the years past during Bob's recovery, their children turned to drugs, alcohol and a promiscuous lifestyle ... self-medicating through their own personal pain and sadness of dealing with their fathers TBI (traumatic brain injury) and a sibling battling cancer. Two of the girls were pregnant at the same time at the young ages of 15 and 18. Anger was the number one emotion that Sharon dealt with as a single parent trying to discipline teenagers without a husband to back her up. Often the children would comment to Sharon: 'I can't stand the sound of your voice' because it was really their father's voice they wanted to hear ... "as it should be," Sharon says.

"It's one thing to have one child go awry, but all four of them," Sharon says of the teen years. "It was definitely attributed to their father's trauma. I've seen every behavior. I've had to flee for my life (from drug behavior). We have been in every health and mental institute in the state of Nebraska."

Sharon tried to get her family to stay in counseling, but when we went "all we did was cry," she recalls. "My children are in their twenties now and they're finally coming out of this. I used to tell my kids, literally, my sanity has been saved at the feet of Jesus."

Shortly after Bob's injury, Sharon had become involved in advocacy for brain injury victims. She continued to advocate for 20 years for this special population of traumatic brain injury in the state of Nebraska, and was the co-executive director for five years for the Nebraska Brain Injury Association. They worked together with the Department of Vocational Rehab writing grants and setting up 32 support groups across the state, collaborating in their efforts to do training and setting up a concussion and sports injury conference at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "I was on the phone from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.," Sharon recalls. "We worked very hard as a grass roots organization." They set up monthly newsletters, manned the telephones and a webpage as well.

The association also tried to establish a trust fund in the State of Nebraska for families with traumatic brain injuries (TBI). A one-time grant -- Sharon knew from experience -- could save families from going into bankruptcy and keep families afloat. "Sometimes they can't even afford to buy groceries or tennis shoes. It affects the life of everyone in the family."

In order to get funding, the association began to knock on the doors of the legislature, and continued knocking for 20 years. When efforts failed, members of the association staged a press conference on the steps of the State Capitol.

The federal grant was finally obtained after months of intense time and energy. They were assured that in the process there would be funding to keep the state office going, but it didn't happen and the association went by the wayside. There is no longer a grass roots office, however, the Department of Education now has an entire division centered on traumatic and acquired brain injuries. "It's not just thrown over into the mental health arena," Sharon adds.

BRAIN INJURIES are often more subtle than falling head-on in a rock pit, such as the ding on the head while playing football or the whiplash from a car accident. Three years ago Sharon had her own brain injury when she was involved in a car accident and was rear ended. Five months after the accident she began having trouble with pains in her legs and lost vision in her left eye. She noticed short-term memory loss, pain in her legs and the inability to multi-task. After a month of the symptoms, she realized she had a brain injury.

After working for many years as a social service director for long term skilled nursing, she had to retire several months ago due to health problems: "I just started to file for disability. That's how long I have denied this, but there's no denying."

The couple recently moved to Geneva, and in the days of unpacking her dishes after the move, Sharon was making a display that offered a lesson in life: "I had some antique cups in a display and the shelf crashed and they broke. They weren't all that bad," she contemplates. "We put them back together, but that's what happens with someone who has a brain injury. It's a valuable, valuable piece; we are so unique. The brain is the one thing that separates us from other creation. But there are no brain transplants. You can't ice a brain, there are to prosthetics to fix it."

It's been 20 years-post since Bob's accident. His brain continues to heal each year and he now speaks, and their daughter who had leukemia as a child was declared healed after ten years. Through it all, one of Sharon's greatest joys has been to use her experience to alleviate the trauma in other's lives: "There's so many balls that are being dropped and there's people out there that are suffering every day. My biggest reward was answering that 800 number when I was executive director of the association. Those people aren't getting the same help now. When I would talk to people they would say I was the first one that understood."

It will be many decades before Sharon sees her vision come to pass of the "little old lady and little old man in the wheel chair," contentedly being pushed by their daughter.

But one thing is certain.

It will.

And when it does, she's going to enjoy every minute of it.

*For more information on Post-Concussive Symptomatology, call the Brain Injury Association of Arizona Phoenix headquarters at 602.952.2449 or the Tucson Chapter at 520.747.7140